



# Doopam As An Indigenous Democratic Institution: A Study From A Democratic Perspective

Tai Gumja

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science

Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh

## ABSTRACT

Prior to the introduction of modern political institutions, Tagin society was governed by an indigenous customary system known as *Doopam/Dungpam*. Rooted in indigenous knowledge and unwritten customary law, *Doopam/Dungpam* functioned as a participatory and consensus-based political institution that regulated social order and collective decision-making. Authority within this system resided in elders and ritual experts, whose legitimacy was derived from moral standing, customary knowledge, and community consent rather than coercive power. With the advent of modern governance, *Doopam/Dungpam* underwent adaptive transformation, incorporating selective modern elements while retaining its core philosophical foundations. This research adopts empirical, descriptive, and analytical methods, employing purposive sampling to present the discussion accurately. The paper analyses *Doopam/Dungpam* as an indigenous democratic institution and examines the persistence of its core values within evolving governance frameworks.

**Keywords:** *Doopam/Dungpam*, Tagin tribe, Customary law, Consensus-based decision-making, Indigenous democracy, Traditional political institutions.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employs descriptive, empirical and analytical methods to interpret qualitative data. Both primary and secondary sources were used. Primary data were collected through interview schedules using purposive sampling, while secondary data were obtained from relevant literature. The data were thematically analyzed to examine *Doopam* through a democratic perspective.

## INTRODUCTION

The Tagin are one of the constitutionally recognised Scheduled Tribes of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Ethnically and culturally, the Tagins trace their origin to *AbuTanyi*, the primeval forefather in the Tagin philosophical and cosmological worldview. *AbuTanyi* occupies a central position in Tagin oral traditions, belief systems, and identity formation, symbolising the ancestral source from which the Tagin people and their socio-cultural institutions have evolved.

Geographically, the Tagin population is predominantly concentrated in the Upper Subansiri district and the Mechuka Circle of Shi Yomi district, which together constitute the principal homeland of the Tagin people.

Culturally, the Tagins are widely recognised for their vibrant and elaborate festivals, particularly *Si-Donyi Hilo* and *Siju*, which are celebrated not only within the Tagin community but are also well known among other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

## DOOPAM/DUNGPAM

The traditional and indigenous political governance system of the Tagin community is known as *Doopam/Dungpam*. Etymologically, the term is derived from two constituent words: “*Doo*” or “*Dung*,” meaning to sit, and “*Pam*,” meaning group or collectivity. When combined, *Doopam/Dungpam* literally signifies sitting together in a group or collective sitting.

In simple terms, *Doopam* may be understood as a sitting or assembly convened for governance purposes. However, it is not a static or fixed institution; rather, it is dynamic and situational in nature. The form, composition, and authority of a *Doopam* are determined by the context in which it is convened. Depending on the nature of the issue under deliberation such as social regulation, dispute resolution, or community welfare, the structure and functional role of the *Doopam* may be known, verified, redefined, or altered.

Thus, *Doopam/Dungpam* represents a flexible and participatory indigenous political institution rooted in collective wisdom, consensus-building, and contextual adaptability, reflecting the Tagin community’s traditional philosophy of governance.

## INSTITUTIONS

Viewed as an institutional system, *Doopam* is entirely rooted in customary and traditional foundations and is governed by indigenous norms, values, and practices. It does not derive its authority from codified statutes or formal state mechanisms, but from long-standing social legitimacy embedded in the cultural worldview of the community. Within its hierarchical institutional framework, *Doopam* is further classified into four sub-institutions for the purpose of structural analysis. Each of these sub-institutions is designed to address and resolve issues corresponding to specific levels and natures of disputes, ranging from domestic and kinship-related matters to broader community concerns.

Consequently, each structural level of *Doopam* embodies distinct values, norms, and ethical orientations, reflecting the scale and gravity of the issues it handles. While the lower tiers emphasize reconciliation, familial harmony, and collective responsibility, the higher tiers increasingly engage principles of social regulation, moral authority, and communal justice. Together, these interrelated structures constitute a coherent indigenous institutional system that ensures social order, conflict management, and political governance within the community.

## MVRUM/UGU/NAMBU DOOPAM

This represents the lowest tier of the *Doopam* system, where issues and disputes arising within the family or among close kin are addressed and resolved. Matters at this level are primarily domestic in nature and are dealt with internally through discussion, persuasion, and consensus among family elders. The objective is not punitive action but the restoration of harmony, social balance, and mutual understanding within the household.

In this context, the lowest tier of *Doopam* may be analytically conceptualized as a family-based political governance system, as it exercises authority, decision-making, and conflict-resolution functions within the smallest social unit of Tagin society. Although informal and unwritten, this level plays a foundational role in the overall *Doopam* structure, as it prevents minor disagreements from escalating into wider clan or village disputes. By emphasizing collective responsibility, respect for elders, and customary norms, this tier reinforces social cohesion and ensures continuity of indigenous political and moral order.

### **NAAMPAM/NAAMPUM DOOPAM**

This *Doopam/Dungpam* functions as a village-level political governance institution encompassing the entire village community. It operates primarily as an inter-family system of governance, wherein representatives or members of different families and clans collectively participate in decision-making processes. Within the socio-political structure of the Tagin village, the *Doopam* serves as the principal forum for addressing issues that arise between or among different family groups.

Conflicts, disputes, and social issues occurring within the village, whether related to land, resources, interpersonal relations, or customary obligations are formally brought before the *Doopam* for deliberation and resolution. Under this institutional framework, disputes are examined through dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building, guided by customary norms, collective wisdom, and moral accountability. The emphasis is not merely on adjudication but on restoring social harmony and maintaining communal cohesion.

Thus, the *Doopam/Dungpam* embodies a participatory and inclusive indigenous governance mechanism, ensuring that intra-village conflicts are resolved through collective engagement rather than unilateral authority. Its role underscores the Tagin community's traditional emphasis on social balance, inter-family cooperation, and community-based political regulation.

### **JAARI JAAKO/NAARI NAAKO/NWW(NWNG) PAABU DOOPAM**

The third level of *Doopam* occupies a higher and more complex position than the preceding two tiers within the Tagin indigenous political system. This level primarily functions as an inter-village governance mechanism, addressing matters that extend beyond the scope of individual families or sub-clans and require collective village-level deliberation and coordination.

At this tier, *Doopam* serves as a formalized platform for regulating interactions among different villages. Issues such as inter-village disputes, collective representations, developmental concerns, alliances, cooperation, resource-sharing arrangements, and broader social or political negotiations are deliberated and resolved under this institutional framework. It ensures social harmony, political stability, and cooperative coexistence among villages by institutionalizing dialogue, negotiation, and customary adjudication. In essence, the third level of *Doopam* reflects the Tagin community's sophisticated understanding of multi-layered governance, where political authority and conflict resolution mechanisms expand progressively in scope in response to the scale and nature of social interactions.

### **PALO MALO/DVGO DVKAR**

The highest level of *Doopam* represents the apex of the Tagin indigenous political system of governance. This level extends its authority over the entire Tagin community, irrespective of settlement patterns, territorial location, or clan affiliation. Functioning as an umbrella institution, it embodies collective unity, oneness, and integration among the Tagin people, thereby reinforcing a shared political consciousness and cultural identity.

This supreme platform of governance is approached by the Tagin people primarily for two reasons. First, it deliberates upon issues of pan-Tagin significance, including collective welfare, social conciliation, inter-community collaboration, cultural consolidation, and overall prosperity. Second, it serves as the final customary authority for disputes and concerns that remain unresolved at the lower tiers of the *Doopam* system. For these reasons, this level is regarded as the highest indigenous platform of decision-making and governance from both social and political perspectives within the Tagin community.

Historically, the 1970s provide one of the significant illustrations of the functioning and relevance of this apex *Doopam*. During this period, representatives of the Tagin community from diverse villages, regions, and clans convened in a collective effort aimed at strengthening social and cultural cohesion. One of the principal objectives of this historic assembly was the establishment of a common festival for the Tagin people, intended to foster unity, shared identity, and cultural integration across the community.

The chairmanship of this *Doopam* assembly was held by late Tadak Dulom, a prominent political leader and then a member of the Pradesh Council, and was subsequently followed by late Popak Bage (ex-Circle Officer), a man who is regarded as the philosopher behind this mass gathering. The meeting was attended by several eminent elders, leaders, and well-wishers of the community, including late Taya Nima, late Toke Mara, late Taser Mra, late Gyaju Chader, late Kyania Rigia, late Jeta Loriak, late Ligio Hina, late Chakto Siga, late Mardam Bage, late Tapu Dera, late Lora Dugi, late Tabu Konia, late Bingsa Kodak, late Pugo Batak, late Puro Bui (Raji) Tamin, late Paksing Siyum, Daklo Nidak, Larbin Nasi, Yari Dulom, Takak Dulom, late Tami Bage, late Punji Mara, late Binya Marde, late Tapor Nguki, late Tater Uli etc, among others.

These distinguished individuals, drawn from diverse geographical and social segments of the Tagin community, collectively laid the foundation for what is now celebrated annually as *Si-Donyi Hilo*, the principal cultural festival of the Tagin people since 1975. Their collective vision and leadership, articulated through the highest level of *Doopam*, demonstrate the enduring capacity of indigenous political institutions to promote cultural revival, social solidarity, and pan-community integration.

Apart from the hierarchical classification of the institutions of *Doopam*, it is also classified into two types—***Tvgung Doopam*** and ***Gungnying (Yaalung) Doopam***, on the basis of their natures, works, and functions.

#### **TVGUNG DOOPAM (Welfare-Oriented Indigenous Governance)**

When *Doopam* is constituted with the objective of promoting collective growth, happiness, prosperity, and overall well-being, it is referred to as *Tvgung Doopam*. The term *Tvgung* is intrinsically associated with progress, prosperity, and social harmony, and therefore denotes a governance process that is fundamentally welfare-oriented in nature.

Within the Tagin cultural framework, *Tvgung* signifies social welfare gatherings and activities, most notably *Nyida* (marriage). In the Tagin community, marriage occupies a central and elevated position in the social value system and is regarded as one of the highest expressions of individual and collective responsibility. Individuals, who are able to perform *Daatv Nyida* (the highest form of marriage ceremony) are socially acknowledged with great respect and are accorded a high social status within the community. This recognition reflects not only personal achievement but also the capacity to uphold and contribute to collective social and cultural continuity.

The philosophical foundation of *Tvgung Doopam* is encapsulated in a culturally rooted Tagin narration:

“*Tvgung Gv Gumpu or Tvgung Gv Sooishi Buu, Yaalung Lo Piipa Buu*”

This expression may be broadly understood and translated as: *Tvgung* brings peace, prosperity, happiness, and social integration among the people within *Doopam*, whereas *Yalung*—signifying war, anger, conflict, and violence, inevitably leads to chaos, disunity, and ill-feeling within society.

Moreover, within the broader classification of *Tvgung Doopam*, it is further categorized into two forms, namely *Gungtv* and *Gungchi*, based on the scale and intensity of prosperity- and growth-oriented activities. *Gungtv* represents the highest level of prosperity and social advancement and is associated with major ceremonial and communal events that signify elevated social achievement and collective well-being.

In contrast, *Gungchi* denotes a comparatively lower level of prosperity, growth, and well-being than *Gungtv*. It encompasses routine and everyday welfare-oriented activities such as simple birthday celebrations, agricultural cultivation, fencing of fields, and other forms of ordinary communal cooperation. Despite their modest scale, these activities play a crucial role in sustaining daily social life and reinforcing collective responsibility within the Tagin community.

This internal classification reflects the Tagin community's nuanced understanding of social development, where both grand ceremonial expressions (*Gungtv*) and modest, routine practices (*Gungchi*) are recognized as integral components of prosperity and social harmony within the framework of *Tvung Doopam*.

## GUNGNYING (YAALUNG) DOOPAM

This form of *Doopam* is exclusively concerned with the processes of settlement, conciliation, persuasion, and collective decision-making aimed at resolving disputes, quarrels, fights, and conflicts arising from issues related to land, marriage, property inheritance, domesticated animals, field cultivation, and similar matters of everyday social life. It functions as a customary institutional mechanism through which conflicts are addressed in a structured and culturally legitimate manner.

The primary objective of this *Doopam* is to maintain and restore peaceful coexistence, social harmony, and cooperative relationships within society. Rather than emphasizing punitive measures, it prioritizes reconciliation, consensus-building, and moral persuasion grounded in customary laws and communal values. Through this approach, *Doopam* reinforces mutual trust, social order, and collective responsibility, thereby ensuring the continuity of harmonious social relations within the Tagin community.

## AUTHORITY

Within indigenous tribal political governance systems, authority is predominantly vested in individuals who possess extensive and well-articulated knowledge of customary laws, traditions, rituals, and collective social norms of a particular tribe or region. Political legitimacy in such systems does not arise from formal elections or codified legal structures, but rather from recognized mastery over indigenous knowledge systems that have evolved through generations.

These knowledgeable individuals are often regarded as legitimate authorities because they are believed to mediate between the human community and the spiritual or cosmological order. In many indigenous belief systems, such authority is symbolically and morally sanctioned through the invocation of the Almighty or supreme spiritual forces. Consequently, individuals who claim authority do so not merely in a personal capacity, but as custodians of divinely sanctioned customary knowledge and moral order. This spiritual legitimacy reinforces social acceptance and compliance within the community.

This belief system is also practiced within the Tagin community, where political and customary authority traditionally rests with elders and leaders who are well-versed in *Pwrw-Vba* (uncodified Tagin constitution of the customary laws), ritual knowledge, and oral traditions. Their authority is socially acknowledged as being conferred through divine sanction, ancestral wisdom, and lived experience rather than through coercive power. As a result, governance within the Tagin indigenous political system is deeply intertwined with cosmology, morality, and customary jurisprudence.

Such a framework underscores the inseparability of political authority, religious belief, and customary knowledge in indigenous societies. It further highlights how legitimacy in Tagin governance is constructed through knowledge-based leadership, spiritual sanction, and communal recognition, ensuring continuity, social cohesion, and normative order within the community.

In Tagin cosmology, individuals who possess profound and specialized knowledge of customary laws, ancestral traditions, and indigenous epistemology are designated as *Nyijik* (expert male) and *Mvjik* (expert female). These terms refer to persons who have attained recognized expertise in forefatherly knowledge, including customary norms, oral traditions, ritual procedures, and moral codes that govern Tagin social and political life.

*Nyijik* and *Mvjik* occupy a central position in the indigenous governance system, as their authority derives from their intellectual mastery of customary knowledge rather than from hereditary privilege or formal political appointment. They function as interpreters, advisors, and adjudicators within the customary framework, guiding decision-making processes and ensuring conformity with established norms and ancestral wisdom.

Within this cosmological and political order, the intervention of the *Nyibu* (shaman) is regarded as the final and most authoritative recourse. The *Nyibu*'s role transcends customary adjudication and enters the spiritual domain, where unresolved disputes, moral transgressions, or ambiguous cases are addressed through ritual mediation with supernatural forces. Consequently, the *Nyibu* is invoked only as a last resort, when resolution cannot be achieved through the deliberations of *Nyijik* and *Mvjik* alone.

This hierarchical arrangement reflects the Tagin community's nuanced understanding of governance, wherein customary knowledge, gender-inclusive expertise, and spiritual authority are systematically differentiated yet interconnected. It demonstrates a layered model of indigenous authority that balances rational customary reasoning with cosmological sanction, thereby maintaining social harmony, moral accountability, and cultural continuity.

## MEDIATOR

Within the Tagin global-view of *Doopam*, mediation constitutes a central mechanism through which social order, justice, and collective decision-making are maintained. The Tagin community recognizes three distinct categories of mediators—*Nyitam*, *Pengko*, and *Gingdung*, each entrusted with specific functional roles across social, economic, and judicial domains. From a democratic perspective, this differentiated mediation system reflects a decentralized, participatory, and functionally specialized mode of indigenous governance.

*Nyitam*, whose mediatory role is confined primarily to marriage institutions, represents the highest form of mediation in the Tagin social order. Marriage, being a foundational social institution that establishes inter-family alliances and long-term social cohesion, demands a mediator endowed with exceptional moral authority, social legitimacy, and communal trust. Democratically, the *Nyitam*'s role signifies collective consent and societal endorsement rather than coercive authority. Decisions facilitated by the *Nyitam* are accepted not due to imposed power but because of the mediator's recognized ethical standing and representational legitimacy within the community.

*Gingdung*, on the other hand, functions predominantly within the framework of *Yaalung Doopam*, where disputes, conflicts, and social tensions are addressed and resolved. Acting in a role analogous to an arbitrator, the *Gingdung* facilitates dialogue, hears contending parties, and guides the resolution process in accordance with customary norms. From a democratic standpoint, this reflects principles of deliberative justice, conflict resolution through consensus, and community-based accountability. The *Gingdung* does not exercise unilateral authority; rather, legitimacy emerges through transparent procedures, collective reasoning, and acceptance by the disputing parties and the wider community.

*Pengko* serves as a mediator primarily in economic activities, functioning as a facilitator in matters of exchange, cooperation, and resource management. This role reflects grassroots economic democracy, where negotiation, mutual benefit, and collective interest guide economic interactions. By facilitating fair transactions and preventing economic disputes, *Pengko* contributes to social equity and economic harmony, which are integral to democratic governance. In recognition of this role, *Pengko* receives a reward known as *Lampu*.

Collectively, the existence of *Nyitam*, *Gingdung*, and *Pengko* illustrates that the *Doopam* system embodies core democratic values such as functional specialization, participatory mediation, moral legitimacy, and consensus-based decision-making. Rather than concentrating authority in a single institution or individual, *Doopam* distributes mediatory power across social domains, ensuring inclusivity, balance, and community control. This indigenous system thus challenges state-centric notions of democracy by demonstrating how democratic principles can be embedded organically within customary institutions and cosmological worldviews.

## CUSTOMARY LAW

In Tagin cosmology, *Doopam* functions as the principal custodian of Tagin customary law. It is through this indigenous political and legal institution that customary laws are interpreted, restructured, and amended in an uncodified and dynamic manner. Such processes of customary restructuring, restoration, and renewal are collectively referred to as *Pwrw-Vba Banaam*, *Kwtw Kyba*, *Kwtw Tunam*, or *Kambv Banaam*. These indigenous concepts are functionally equivalent to the law-making or legislative processes.

Through these mechanisms, Tagin customary laws have been continuously consolidated, refined, and adapted across generations, ensuring their continued validity and social relevance. This evolutionary process allows the community to critically reassess inherited norms, retaining those that promote social harmony while permanently abolishing laws and practices deemed irrelevant, unjust, or incompatible with changing moral and social contexts.

As a result of such customary reforms, several practices have been formally discontinued within the Tagin community. These include *Nyimak Paanam* (revenge-taking or war amongst clan/village), *Laapiya Taaknam* (punitive confinement by locking the legs in wooden holes), child marriage, *Laakchak Chiknam / Nyeelak Panaam* (the cutting of an enemy's hands as an act of revenge) etc. The abolition of these practices reflects the community's ethical evolution and the capacity of *Doopam* to serve as a progressive and reformative institution.

Procedurally, these deliberations and law-making processes are typically conducted in the open compound surrounding a nearby house, known as *Naako Jaaring*. This space symbolically represents the public and collective nature of customary proceedings. Notably, *Doopam* does not operate from a fixed or permanent location; rather, its flexibility in spatial organization underscores its community-centered and participatory character, reinforcing the principle that customary authority resides in collective deliberation rather than in physical institutions.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion comprehensively demonstrates that, although the Tagin people were historically unfamiliar with modern political governing institutions, their indigenous political system functioned with sufficient capacity and effectiveness to govern them. Indeed, the Tagin indigenous institution of *Doopam* regulated social order, resolved conflicts, and guided communal life in a manner functionally equivalent to modern political systems.

Notably, *Doopam* continues to operate as a powerful social force that binds the Tagin people both socially and culturally. Its enduring relevance lies that has the dynamic and adaptive nature of *Doopam*, particularly its ability to reinterpret, reform, and refine customary laws in response to changing social realities, has enabled it to remain functional and meaningful over time.

Consequently, *Doopam* persists as a significant indigenous political institution within the Tagin community, coexisting alongside modern governance structures while retaining its cultural legitimacy and normative authority. This continuity underscores the resilience of indigenous political systems and highlights their capacity to evolve without losing their foundational principles, thereby reaffirming the central role of *Doopam* in sustaining Tagin social, cultural, and political life.

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